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ABSTRACT

Although American society may never have adequately educated the majority of its immigrants and their children, many who lacked a good education in an earlier era could support families through factory, agricultural, or construction work. Today's jobs require more education. Those with limited English proficiency and literacy skills will be only marginally employable. Focusing on Hmong Laotian refugees in St. Paul, Minnesota, schools, this paper argues that the prevailing mainstreaming or assimilation model of education does not fit many refugees' or immigrants' needs; as a result, schools are undereducating a substantial number of young people. Information is presented regarding Hmong background and culture and the particular difficulties confronting students at home and at school. Besides reviewing major language research, this paper presents new data--a compilation of SRA (Science Research Associates) test statistics for Hmong 10th-graders at a St. Paul high school falling into particular "time-in-country" categories. These statistics highlight instructional and programming dilemmas faced by secondary-level students and teachers. St. Paul schools' programs are also reviewed in terms of their capacity to meet Hmong students' needs. Alternative programs are suggested, including bilingual classes, "sheltered" content-area classes, partnerships with outside organizations, vocational education, and classes in native language literacy and culture. (Contains 34 references.) (MLH)

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Mainstreaming Hmong Students:

For Whom and How Much?

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Abstract

Focusing on Hmong refugees in St. Paul, MN schools, this paper considers the difficulties faced by recently-arrived refugee and immigrant students and their families, including cultural-generational conflicts as well as academic difficulties. In addition to reviewing important language research, the study presents new data. The author has compiled SRA test statistics for Hmong 10th-graders at St. Paul's Johnson High who fit into particular "time-in-country" categories. These statistics highlight instructional and programing dilemmas faced by students and teachers at the secondary level. Implications for programing which are discussed include bilingual classes, "sheltered" content-area classes, partnerships with outside organizations to offer instructional and cultural support, vocational education, and classes in native language literacy and culture.

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Introduction

They are coming from all countries. Los Angeles school district alone must cope with eighty-one languages. Some immigrant children do well, but the "mass of immigrant children lack the advantages of education. More are coming poverty-stricken, malnourished, ill or, in the cases of refugees, traumatized by violence they have seen or suffered in their countries . . . It is something out of Dickens" (Nazario, 1989).

In the United States, which has experienced waves of newcomers since its inception, immigrant's problems have a long history. However, recent years have witnessed a change in the world economy from an industrial to a technological age. ". . . the manufacturing age has come and gone, and today's jobs demand far greater agility." (Lopaz, 1989). The time seems to have passed when those who couldn't speak the language, or lacked education and skills, could support families through assembly line, agricultural or unskilled construction work. Today's emerging new jobs require more education. Given the economy's needs, all schools are stretched to their limits to educate well. But urban schools, with their larger percentages of immigrants and poor, cannot keep up. "Too much diversity and not enough dollars" seems to be the routine answer to the complaint.

It is unclear if our society has ever been able to effectively provide a high level of education to the majority of immigrants or their children. But in the past, more employment opportunities existed for those who simply did not acquire a good education. Today, if a child fails to adequately learn English or cannot do the academic work required to gain an adequate education, it is quite likely that the child will be only marginally employable, perhaps joining the welfare roles. As with all students, the less adequately refugee students are educated the greater the likelihood of future costs to society in the form of unemployment, crime, social welfare, justice programs, rehabilitation, food stamps, low income housing, and fewer tax dollars.

Position and purpose

This paper takes the position that the programs and structure of many American schools fit very poorly the needs of many refugee, immigrant and other limited-English proficient (LEP)

students, and that because of this we are indeed undereducating a substantial number of young people. An "assimilation" model underlies the structure of most schools. Schools stress "mainstreaming" as the best way to ensure an equal education for all and to keep at bay the specters of segregation and discrimination. Yet, many LEP students have language, academic, and cultural-adjustment needs which cause them great difficulty in making progress in "mainstream" academic classes; needs which may render the assimilation or mainstreaming model counterproductive under certain circumstances. To put it another way, providing an equal education for all may not be as simple as just putting everyone in the same classroom.

Though this paper will make suggestions regarding alternatives or additions to the programs offered in most schools, these suggestions are merely possibilities. It is not intended that this paper will provide all the answers or in any sense be a cookbook. The purpose of this paper is to "spotlight" the issues and start discussion regarding ways of ameliorating the dilemmas facing schools and students.

To this end, and for the sake of making a complex problem a bit more concrete, this paper will focus on the experience of only one group, Hmong refugees from Laos, in one big city school system, St. Paul, Minnesota. Information will be presented regarding the background and culture of the Hmong, as well as particular difficulties that many students are having, both in terms of cultural or generational conflicts at home, and academic or adjustment problems in school. Current research regarding academic needs of refugees will be reviewed. The programs available in the St. Paul Schools will also be presented with attention given to the manner in which the approaches taken may ignore or exacerbate the difficulties faced by students and staff alike, that is, the extent to which the programs "fit" the needs of the students. Lastly, alternatives will be considered which may offer the promise of providing a better education for many Hmong and other LEP students.

The Hmong

Background and culture

The Hmong began arriving in America from Southeast Asia in 1975. Allied with the United States during the Vietnam War, the Hmong were forced to flee their native Laos. Prior to the war, the Hmong had primarily been an agrarian people who kept themselves separate from their linguistically different neighbors. Though money was occasionally used when dealing with ethnically different people, bartering with goods was a more typical way of doing business. Exchanges of goods and services were routine within a Hmong village. All members of the village were constantly aware that cooperation between community members and cohesiveness of the group were paramount in maintaining the social structure that served and protected the community. The cousin who assisted in the planting of crops could count on assistance in the event of sickness or injury. A clan structure evolved which codified the relationships and responsibilities of all members. A proper marriage of one's daughter to a boy of another clan in a neighboring village ensured harmony between groups and strengthened mutual assistance bonds. This sense of cooperation and cohesiveness necessitated a willingness of members to put the good of the family, the clan, and the village ahead of the particular desires of the individual. Discussion, compromise and consensus were important in decision making, and though a village leader might have the last word, group input had to be sought. A leader who appeared to be making decisions not based on group good could easily be voted out. It was, in essence, a democracy. When conflict arose between individuals, great care was taken that it be resolved with discussion and that a just settlement be found. Again, a central goal was harmony of the group. The clan structure, with its responsibilities and obligations, curtailed individual freedoms and choices, but provided both physical and emotional security and helped the Hmong avoid crime, juvenile delinquency, and other social problems. (Dao Yang, 1990a)[1]

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[1]Dao Yang was the first Hmong to earn a PhD (Paris, 1972). An economist and sociologist, Dr. Yang is a leading authority on the Hmong, having an "insiders" knowledge as well as academic credentials. The author has chosen to rely extensively on information obtained from

Prior to the Vietnam War, few Hmong received any sort of formal schooling. As of 1984, 68% of the Hmong children in the St. Paul and Minneapolis school systems and 90% of their parents had no formal schooling before coming to the United States. (Sonsalla, 1984) The few who had attended school generally had acquired only a marginal education in Laotian or Thai schools, studying in a language other than Hmong. Except to the extent that individuals had been exposed to aircraft, radios, and weapons during the war, few Hmong had any real familiarity with the high-tech world most Westerners take for granted. (Tou Yang, 1992)

Though formal education might have been lacking, children received continual instruction from parents, extended family, and neighbors in the history and traditions of the Hmong people. Social and moral values, the codes of conduct and ethics that acted as the glue of the clan and village system, were taught at the fireside rather than in a classroom. In the absence of television, discussion and storytelling drew adults and children together. (Dao Yang, 1990a)

As the Hmong fled Laos and were resettled in the United States, they encountered profound differences in language, culture, values, economic life, technology, education and family structures. Some refugees have adapted to these differences and perhaps find themselves better off financially than they were in their home country. The impact of American culture, however, has had some alarming effects.

Cultural / Generational conflicts

> Over the last few years, the Hmong refugee community in the United States has been struck by a social phenomenon until now unknown in Hmong traditional society. Some call it a crisis of adolescence; others consider it as an urban problem; still others describe it as a result of culture shock. This social phenomenon is the generation conflict. . . . Hmong teenagers, uprooted from their own culture and thrown into the middle of an industrial society for which they are not prepared, find themselves torn between two different worlds. . . . They are buffeted by brutal social changes over which they have no control. This generation conflict is characterized by rebellion of the youth against traditional Hmong social order which, which according to elders, has preserved Hmong social harmony across the centuries. (Dao Yang, 1990b)

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interviews with Dr. Yang, rather than papers done by Westerners, who themselves tend to quote Dao Yang extensively. For those well acquainted with the Hmong, much of the information presented here regarding the culture and the adjustment problems of the Hmong is virtually common knowledge.

To their credit, many if not most Hmong young people learn ways of accommodating both the culture of their parents and that of their American classmates, though they are often inadequately prepared to deal very well in either. Unfortunately, for many others, the situation becomes more dysfunctional. While considering themselves "Hmong", they often have little knowledge of traditional ways and moral values. In America, the systems for transmitting traditional culture are missing or impaired, and seldom do these young people avail themselves of the opportunities that might exist to learn "how to be Hmong." Commonly young people reject their parents' concerns and values, feeling their parents know nothing of the new country and therefore have no real advice to give.

A sort of "role-reversal" often occurs which causes children to lose respect for parents. Because children attend school and learn English more quickly than adults, they commonly become the ones the family depends upon for all contact with the English speaking world: social service paperwork, bills, house rent. This creates a role reversal in which parents and other adults of the family are devalued.

> The youth lose respect for the elders who, they think, cannot teach them anything about the new world and who cannot help them at all with their adjustment to a new culture. As a result, they seek to impose their own rules at home, doing whatever they want, going out with whomever they please, and coming home at all hours of the night, without any restrictions. If they sense any opposition or receive any reprimands from the family, they may simply quit school and run away from home. (Dao Yang, 1990b)

Minnesota's welfare system has also had a detrimental effect on the relationship of young people to their elders. Dao Yang points out that, while economic realities dictate that many Hmong people require some sort of assistance, aspects of the welfare system have been quite negative for the Hmong as a group. Welfare has contributed strongly to the destruction of the solidarity and cohesiveness of the Hmong social system. Welfare, public housing, and medical assistance are provided to individuals or to nuclear families. This frees individuals to ignore social pressures brought to bear by the extended family, the clan, and the greater Hmong community. The individual does not "need" the clan. Protection, security, shelter, and sustenance are provided by

the state. Because the clan and greater Hmong community has lost much of its power to assist, it also has lost its power to force people to conform.

In Laos, if the individual ignored the will of the majority (the clan), he/she risked not receiving the assistance of the group at a future time when that help might be needed. In the United States, no such threat exists. Here, at worst, there is the social cost of gossip or backbiting. For teenagers choosing not to listen to their parents or to accept Hmong values, adult gossip may be meaningless; therefore, there are few sanctions which might force them into line. Though corporal punishment was considered reasonable in Laos, in America Hmong parents voice the belief that they cannot discipline their child in any way or they will be arrested. (Dao Yang, 1990a)

If a teenager has rejected Hmong values as "old fashioned," the clan is unable to exact any psychological sanctions which might keep bad behavior from ever occurring or which would serve as a punishment. The welfare system may literally reduce the respect of the teenager for the parent who clearly is not providing for the family but is simply being taken care of, like a child. (Mouacheupao, 1989)

A number of thoughtful observers have speculated about the difficulties which might be experienced by a cooperative, agrarian people who are suddenly thrust into a competitive, capitalistic urban setting. It would appear that the Hmong could provide an excellent case study. Presently 60% of Minnesota's Hmong people receive welfare funds and few adults have prospects for employment due to very limited English proficiency and few transferrable job skills. Yet, in spite of employment difficulties, it is the youth problem that most concerns Hmong leaders.

If some Hmong youth seem intent on rejecting the culture of their parents, we might hope that they at least would embrace American culture, making a rapid, if somewhat painful, transition to their adopted home. Unfortunately, this is often not the case.

Hmong young people attend American schools but often have few close American friends. Much of what they know of American culture is learned from television which provides a distorted view at best. Many pretend to live the American way of life but often have only a superficial understanding of the American system or American spirit. They often interpret the concept of

"freedom" to mean that there are no restrictions on their actions or personal desires. To put it another way, many give up their Hmong values without truly acquiring real American values. Instead of interacting with adults around the fireside, learning traditions and moral values, they ignore the adults, watch TV and talk to other teenagers, usually other Hmong teenagers who are as disaffected as they. (Dao Yang, 1990b)

Clearly, not everything being absorbed from TV or from classmates has been positive. The number of arrests of Hmong juveniles has skyrocketed in the last four years. Auto thefts in St. Paul nearly doubled in 1989 alone, and based on arrest statistics, this doubling was due almost entirely to the increase in Hmong teenagers who became involved in stealing cars. (deFiebre, 1989) Gang activity, seemingly nonexistent in 1987, is now accepted as routine, with Hmong gangs of more than 200 members reported. Several gang-related deaths have occurred in recent years. (deFiebre, 1992) This rise in gang activity baffles Hmong parents who feel unable to control their children. Hmong police officers and elders feel that while much of this is due to TV and a loss of traditional values, some of it is also a function of the fact that many Hmong live in St. Paul's toughest neighborhoods where they must contend with other non-Hmong gangs. Further, many gang members seem to be those who are having the greatest difficulties with school and therefore seek status and power elsewhere.

> The two leading indicators for Hmong kids being involved in gangs is one, having no father at home, and two, the kids who do very badly in school. We don't know if they join gangs because they are poor students or if they are poor students because of the gang. But most likely, the kids who have no success in school, they want something. If you can't be smart, be tough. (Shoua Cha, 1992)

Academic problems

The problems of the cultural/generational conflict is exacerbated by the general difficulties students experience in schools. The Hmong simply haven't experienced the type of success some other Asian groups have had in school (Walker, 1988). This is not to say that all Hmong students are doing poorly. On the contrary, some are doing quite well. However, a recent study done by the author of tenth graders at St. Paul's Johnson High School indicated that Hmong

students who fall into certain categories based upon their time in the country are without question facing an uphill struggle.

Of Johnson High School's nearly 1500 students, about 400 are Hmong, roughly 26% of the total enrollment; this is somewhat above the district average of 20% Hmong.[2] Hmong students were surveyed regarding a number of factors which might relate to academic success in high school. The results of SRA (Science Research Associates) standardized test scores were then compiled to be considered as a measure of the success of individual students and as a predictor of future academic success. When the various test scores were compared, the factor that stood out as the strongest predictor of success was the length of time the student had been in the country ($r = 0.845$, correlation). Scores were then grouped into the following four categories: students who had been in the country eight years or longer, those who had been in the country five to seven years, those who had been here three to four years, and those who had been here two years or less. These categories correspond approximately to the following percentages of Johnson High's Hmong population:

8 or more years in USA -- 49%, or roughly half of the Hmong students, about 200

5 to 7 years in USA -- 13%, or about 50 students

3 to 4 years in USA -- 17%, about 70 students

1 to 2 years in USA -- 21%, about 80 students

The percentages shown are based on the responses of students surveyed. The student totals are estimates based on the general enrollment of Hmong students, not all of whom took the SRA tests during the 1991-92 school year. An examination of SRA (Science Research Associates) test scores in each category revealed the following:

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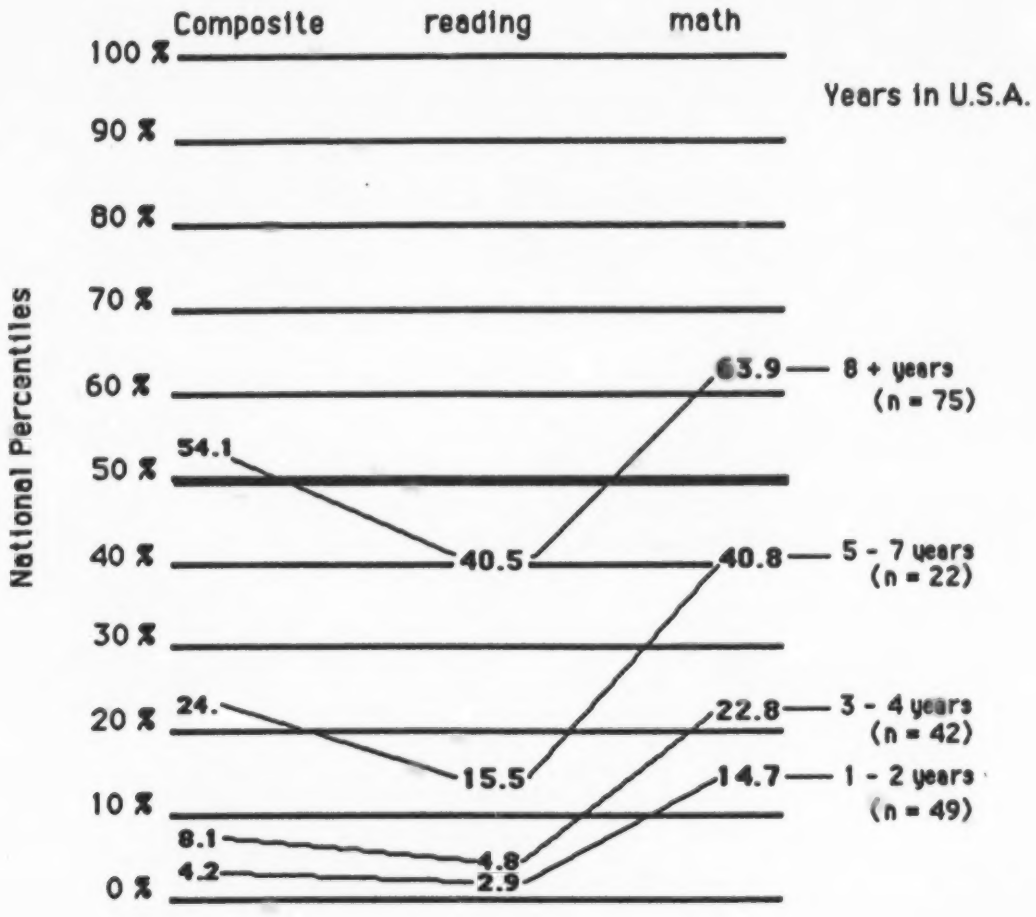
[2]St. Paul's overall minority count for the 1991-92 school year was 45 percent.

Mean SRA test scores of Hmong 10th graders
(relative to "time-in country")
at Johnson High School, St. Paul, MN (Fall 1991)



50 % = National Mean Score

These statistics reveal that Hmong tenth-graders who started American school in kindergarten, first or second grade, as a group are performing near national averages, except in reading where their scores dip to 40%, indicating these students are about one grade level behind the national average. This lag in reading development might be expected to be the result of a non-English home environment, a lack of English reading materials at home, and the inability of the parents to read to their children or otherwise encourage and assist with their academic development. We might also expect that poorer reading abilities could have a negative effect on progress in other academic courses. Yet, in an overall sense the academic picture would not appear to be so ominous for Hmong youth who entered the U.S. as young children.

Statistics of this sort, however, tend to ignore the likelihood that by tenth grade, a fairly significant number of Hmong students may have already left school. This appears to be particularly true for Hmong girls, who even after being in the U.S. a number of years still tend to marry in their middle or even early teens. Figures from the Minnesota State Department of Education reveal that statewide, 665 students who were classified as "Limited English Proficient" dropped out during the 1989 school year. By comparison, that year 389 LEP students graduated from high school, and 674 LEP students successfully exited from LEP programs to fully mainstreamed programs. In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that many young people fail to register for school and simply disappear from the system instead of formally "dropping out". Hmong leaders suggest that these are the very students who are doing most poorly. Further, though the mean of the SRA scores for "8+ years-in-country" group appears to fall in the average range, one-fifth of the students were in fact scoring below the 25th percentile, indicating very substantial academic problems.

As we examine the scores of Hmong tenth-graders who began American school in late elementary school (5-7 years in U.S.), we see students who clearly have not caught up to their American peers. With a "composite" SRA mean of only 24% and a reading mean of only 16%, these

students almost certainly encounter difficulties with most academic subjects, lagging at least three grade levels behind their American peers.

The picture looks even bleaker for those who entered American schools even later. Few of them have a realistic hope of competing in a mainstream classroom. With an SRA composite mean of 8% and a reading mean score of 4.8 %, these Hmong students with only three to four years of American school face mainstream classrooms in which the vast majority of the other students are far better prepared to deal with the subjects than they are. The scores of students who have only been in the U.S. for one or two years are even lower. Students from this group who were interviewed after the test said they understood very little beyond the section on math computation and that the reading was far too difficult.

It should be noted that for each "time-in-country" grouping, the math scores were the highest of the areas tested. This could reflect the notion that math is less "language-bound" than the other subjects, allowing all to compete more easily. It is also important to note, however, that math is one of the few areas in which St. Paul Schools has allowed a degree of bilingual instruction; that is, Hmong students have often had access to bilingual teachers and aides who could assist them in understanding the concepts and word-problems they encounter in math class.

Overall, these statistics suggest that schools should be most immediately concerned with those students who enter the country in junior or senior high school and perhaps even in late elementary school, and that we should be seeking alternative methods and programs for these students who presently appear to have little chance of catching up to their American peers academically. We should also be concerned about that percentage of Hmong youth who came to the U.S. as young children but have had little academic success and by high school may have become discouraged and disaffected. Though the statistics clearly demonstrate reasons for concern, we might further ask why students are not adapting more quickly.

Other Research

For ESL and bilingual teachers, the preceding statistics are not particularly surprising, but for non-specialists, some explanations are in order. The results of the study above parallel those of a larger one done by Virginia Collier (1987) who studied the academic progress of students who had entered the country with education levels commensurate to that of their American age-peers. She found that students entering the U.S. at ages five to seven generally reached the fiftieth percentile on the SRA before leaving elementary school. She found that eight to eleven year-olds were the group which made the most rapid progress, requiring between 2 to 5 years to reach the national average. Twelve to fifteen year-olds required 6 to 8 years to reach the fiftieth percentile, though most in this last category would never be able to reach this level before age ended their high school careers. Collier's study pointed out just how long it takes for LEP students to become competitive with native speakers of English, even when the students have entered the U.S. with an educational level equivalent to that of their American peers. Collier's work supports the view of Cummins (1976, 1980, 1981) which is that while basic interpersonal communication (speaking and listening skills) is generally learned within two years, cognitive academic language proficiency (reading and writing skills) takes far longer and that if students have become quite capable of dealing with abstract written language in the first language, this is readily transferrable to the second language. Collier's findings that older LEP students require more time to "catch up" to native speakers is explained by the fact that the SRA exams become more complex and difficult with each grade level, requiring increasing content-area knowledge. Yet, while engaged in learning English for at least the first two years in America, the content-area education of these students is interrupted. They are placed in a difficult position, analogous to trying to jump on a moving train which continually gathers speed. It is easiest to do at the beginning and becomes increasingly difficult as time passes.

Since Collier's subjects entered America with a fairly good prior education, it should not be surprising that as much difficulty as they had, they nevertheless did much better than the Hmong

students of St. Paul who for the most part have entered American school with little or no prior education. Without prior education, students have no academic reading skills to transfer into the new language, little background knowledge of the various subject areas to bring into the new reading situation, and are even unable to translate unfamiliar words with bilingual dictionaries. Without this background knowledge, with few reading-comprehension skills, and with a limited vocabulary, much of the material they are expected to absorb is, in fact, incomprehensible.

Ironically, in spite of the fact that the students are surrounded by spoken and written English in mainstream classrooms, very little progress is made in reading, the crucial element in academic success. This irony is explained by related theories of linguists and reading specialists. The "Threshold" theory (Cummins 1980, Laufer and Simms 1985) suggests that below a certain reading and language competence level, or threshold, students are unlikely to apply effective reading strategies. This threshold reflects the students' background knowledge. This threshold has also been referred to as "receptive competence" (Tudor and Hafiz 1989). The message of a given text is rendered useless if the receiver does not have the skills or background to understand it. Krashen's work (1989) suggests that "comprehensible input" appears to be responsible for far greater increases in vocabulary and reading comprehension than any sort of direct instruction of vocabulary or language structure. Students whose receptive competence is very low, however, are unable to absorb and understand the writer's input, which therefore remains incomprehensible. "Schema theory" (Brandsford & Johnson 1973, Rummelhart 1982) suggests that as we read, we access schemata that seem to relate to what we are trying to understand. Some of these are syntactic schemata; others are information based. The more knowledge any of us has of given topics and language structures, the better we understand new but related material. The more limited our background, the more likely it is that we will simply not understand what we are trying to read and will gain little from the experience except frustration.

Whether it is called comprehensible input, receptive competence, threshold, frustration level, schema, or simply "background knowledge," it all simply means that students who bring little into the reading or educational experience are not in the position to get much out if it.

Elementary and reading teachers are aware of this and tend to do a variety of context and background building activities to generate interest, make up for deficits students may have, and improve comprehension. Some of the methods which have shown promise include story-mapping or charting to teach organization of stories (Gordon & Braun 1983, Pearson 1982); macro-cloze and scrambled stories which encourage students to finish stories or put them in sensible order (Whaley 1981); advanced organizers to focus on structure and context of the reading material (Swaby 1978); inferential strategies to encourage prediction based on what is known (Hansen 1981); a variety of questioning techniques which focus students' attention on the material, on the context, or on what is known or can be inferred (Tabs 1975, Aulls 1978, Herber 1979, Raphael 1982).

These are all worthwhile methods which focus on building background knowledge prior to the reading experience or which otherwise improve comprehension. Unfortunately, most are used only by elementary school teachers who know the needs of individual students very well and define their job in terms of building basic reading skills and basic knowledge. In secondary schools, teachers commonly see themselves as teaching a subject rather than a basic skill. They know the needs of individual less well because they see 150 students per day instead of 30. The increased volume and abstract nature of the reading makes it more difficult to do pre-reading activities or walk the students through the written material. Secondary teachers assume that, though there will be a certain range of abilities, most students will have basic skills and knowledge on which to build, and of course, this is generally the case. If some students are remarkably deficient in skills or background, secondary teachers often feel it is beyond their abilities and/or job description to remediate them, which it may well be. LEP students "mainstreamed" into these classrooms are quite unlikely to receive needed additional assistance.

Into this situation come the Hmong, who in terms of academic background, have had precious little to bring into the American school experience. It should, therefore, not be surprising that they have met with difficulties, particularly on the secondary level. In fact it should be surprising that they have done as well as they have, considering their lack of formal

education in the home country, the persecution they have endured as refugees, their poverty, and their minority status in America.

St. Paul Schools: Mainstreaming + ESL

Prior to 1978, St. Paul had so few LEP students that they could be pulled out of their regular school and transported to an elementary school for a portion of every day for special tutoring and instruction in English as a Second Language (ESL). After 1978, large influxes of Hmong and other refugees forced the district to establish ESL programs in various schools. Because there were so few people available who were trained to teach ESL and virtually no bilingual staff, teachers from a variety of subject areas were pressed into service to teach ESL. Some self-contained ESL classrooms were created at the elementary level though the majority of students were dealt with on a pull-out basis, receiving one to five hours of ESL per week in addition to their mainstream instruction. At the secondary level, students were given one to three hours of ESL per day depending upon their level and mainstreamed into classes deemed most appropriate by counselors. In some schools, counselors tended to give the new Hmong students exactly the same required courses as all other students, while in other schools, students were assigned less academically challenging mainstream classes such as art and physical education, until it was deemed appropriate to place them in science, social studies, and more difficult reading-intensive classes. The only bilingual classes created were math and health and these only in a few schools. In 1983, Minnesota mandated ESL licensure and from that point on, the district began to seek and hire trained ESL teachers. (Dufresne 1984)

Except for the fact that most of the ESL staff are now licensed, the LEP program in St. Paul today is largely unchanged from that of 1979. Because of the great difficulties that Hmong LEP students have had in certain academic subjects, ESL staff have often found themselves teaching or assisting with "content-material" such as science and social studies within the framework of ESL classes. In some schools, this occurs within the context of regular ESL classes, whereas in other schools, ESL teachers have actually created "LEP social studies" classes. Still other schools have created "resource classes" which are devoted to assisting students with the problems they are

having with mainstream classes. While many ESL teachers have been willing to do this necessary task, they have been concerned about the precious time this takes away from the crucial job of teaching language. ESL staff and members of the Hmong community therefore requested that bilingual classes or LEP-targeted content-area classes (often called "sheltered classes") be created with staff licensed in those subjects. The concern was strong enough that a committee of all secondary ESL chairpersons brought the issue to the attention of the office of the superintendent. For these ESL teachers, experience had verified the theories discussed above; the Hmong students were simply not benefiting from the mainstream content-area classes, nor were the mainstream classes having any discernable positive effect on English acquisition. The ESL teachers hoped to see classes created where students with similar problems could receive instruction at a level and rate they could understand, with attention paid to their needs for extra background information and language development.

Though St. Paul has had a court-mandated Spanish-bilingual program since 1976, Hmong-bilingual programs have remained available only for math classes in four buildings. The school district has chosen not to endorse the creation of sheltered content classes using the certified personnel of the mainstream departments. ESL teachers in some schools have been allowed to teach sheltered social studies classes though permission has been inconsistent. While the rationale behind the policies have never been published by the school district, the author's discussions with various district administrators suggest the following concerns:

1.) Special content classes just for Hmong or other LEP students could be construed as segregation, a situation which might cause the district problems with the Office of Civil Rights or other governing agencies and could perhaps lead to a lawsuit.

2.) Perhaps the district would be doing a disservice to Hmong students by <u>not</u> mainstreaming them fully. Perhaps the students would feel "inferior" if they were placed in a special class away from the native speakers. Perhaps special classes were just delaying the inevitable jump into the mainstream and in fact were providing an inferior education.

3.) In discussing bilingual classes, some administrators revealed that they believed that these were simply "Hmong language classes". Simply put, they didn't believe that the students would learn English if they were receiving instruction in Hmong. Again, the view was that the child was being shortchanged and that English acquisition would be delayed.

4.) When issues of the school's role in maintaining the traditional values of the Hmong child were raised, the feeling was that this task is outside the role of the school and that in fact the child ought to learn and come to embrace American culture and values.

5.) ESL and bilingual classes have been viewed as short-term problems which should not be allowed to overly disrupt the regular school schedule. Prior to 1978, these classes were not an issue, and some administrators seemed to feel that when Hmong immigration stops the problem is likely to go away. Unfortunately this attitude ignores the fact that other groups with problems similar to the Hmong (e.g. lacking prior education in their native language) will continue to arrive: Ethiopians, Central Americans, etc. Furthermore, St. Paul Schools now have a 22% Asian population which is not about to go away.

Many ESL teachers and some members of the Hmong community remain frustrated at the school district's failure to consider the research of Cummins, Collier and others, and to alter the its approach to education of the Hmong LEP students. At the 1990 MinneTESOL conference, a panel of linguists, ESL and bilingual teachers, and Hmong students concluded that the failure to embrace bilingual education and/or sheltered content classes has had the following ongoing effects in St. Paul and other districts:

1) *ESL Teachers focus on vocabulary development and content area information, and spend inadequate time on crucial language structure issues.* ESL teachers become responsible for a wider variety of tasks than are normally expected or can effectively be done with limited time. As language teachers, they are normally expected to impart the basic structures of English, provide the students with the opportunity to practice these structures in oral and written forms until they are fluent in the language, and teach enough high frequency words to give meaning to the structures and to communicate or converse in an ordinary manner. However, when students enter with large knowledge deficits, have few transferrable reading skills, and cannot use bilingual aides to help themselves, the ESL teacher often finds it necessary to deal extensively with reading and vocabulary development. Furthermore, teachers must spend additional time teaching content area facts and concepts in order to assist the students in understanding the material being read and to deal with mainstream classes they are in (or soon will be in). A common result: inadequate time is spent on crucial language structure issues. Students often never completely understand the structure of the language and exhibit ongoing speaking and writing problems and related reading-comprehension problems.

2) *Students exit ESL with inadequate general knowledge and vocabulary background.* In this case, students flounder in mainstream classes, expending much effort with little gain because the language level of the coursework is so far beyond them that they can understand little and cannot use bilingual materials to help themselves. Commonly students sit quietly, study hard

(though ineffectively), copy answers from classmates or the text to hand in for homework, and are given passing grades because of conduct, attendance, attitude, and hard work.[3]

3) *Those students passing mainstream content classes without truly understanding the material are unprepared to deal with more difficult academic or work-related tasks.* Some are allowed to speak and write ungrammatically throughout high school and are thereby precluded from effectively continuing higher education and are excluded from many employment possibilities.

4) *Many students become jaded or disaffected due to continual frustration, sometimes exhibiting behavior problems or choosing to drop out.* These become prime candidates for gangs. Several Hmong youth-gang members who fit this description have been killed or have participated in killings in the last several years in St. Paul.

5) *Mainstream teachers face instructional dilemmas: Either they ignore the special problems of the LEP students and teach the main body of students the appropriate material or spend large amounts of time in remediation of LEP students, perhaps ignoring the needs of others.* If the LEP students are quite deficient in language and general knowledge, if the gap is too great between LEP and regular students, the teacher is very likely to fail. More often than not, it is the LEP student who will lose out, though the teacher also faces great frustration and much additional work.

6.) *Students are either allowed to flounder in classes over their heads or are continually scheduled into classes with little academic substance: physical education, art, industrial arts, home economics.* In either case, they are being denied the opportunity to learn skills and information needed for more advanced education or better jobs. (Bosher, et. al. 1990)

The above dilemmas and difficulties can be explained by the research of Cummins, Collier and others regarding the dynamics of academic language development and the lack of prior education of Hmong students. Additional factors also contribute to poor academic success and exacerbate the cultural/generational conflicts the students experience at home. Like most American secondary schools, those of St. Paul stress independence, individualism, and competitiveness rather than those elements that are strong components of traditional Hmong culture: interdependence, cooperation, and group cohesiveness. Each student is sent to six different teachers; they are

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[3]Evaluations of St. Paul's Title VII refugee-assistance program revealed that very few students ever are given failing grades, with the average grade being being perhaps "C+", in spite of the fact that students often report that they really don't understand the subject and often fail all their tests. Program evaluators speculate that good attendance, completed homework and good behavior is rewarded by many teachers.

remixed with a different set of students every hour; classes and teachers are changed at the semester. This structure does not encourage the formation of close, long-term helping relationships with either teachers or peers. In fact, helping one another is often viewed as cheating. Students are individually evaluated with grades which may place them in competition with one another, grades which are likely to be interpreted by each individual as his/her level of personal success or failure. This system fails to make use of the cultural strengths that Hmong students are likely to bring to class, and in so doing, slows their academic progress and increases their sense of frustration and inability. Further, the system gives the message that those elements so integral to Hmong culture really aren't very valuable.

While ESL, bilingual, or LEP "sheltered" classes are likely to be tailored to the cultural and academic needs of Hmong students, mainstream classes are not. Ironically, a central rationale used to support mainstreaming is that it lessens the chance of discrimination. Yet, for many Hmong students, mainstream classes are more discriminatory, not less, because they don't meet the students' needs, linguistic, academic, or cultural.

Summary

While it is perceived by the public that Asian immigrants in general do well in school, in fact a substantial number are encountering great problems. An examination of Hmong refugees in St. Paul reveals that those students who do not enter American school before fourth or fifth grade have little chance of successfully competing in high school academic classes. The difficult and lengthy task of learning academic English is, for these students, exacerbated by having little or no prior education in their native language before coming to the U.S. Language and reading research tells us that background knowledge and general cognitive academic skills, even in another language, are crucial to English reading comprehension.

The "mainstreaming plus ESL" approach of St. Paul schools appears to poorly fit the needs of this particular group of students, who, because of their limited backgrounds, must be given particular assistance in content-area classes as well as in general language and reading development.

For Hmong students who enter in early elementary school, the gap in background knowledge between themselves and their American peers is not so great, and perhaps because of having additional years in school, it appears that the majority are able to eventually catch up and compete with their American-born classmates, at least by the time they reach high school. The mainstreaming approach seems to be fairly successful for this group of Hmong students, though for a sizeable number of them, there appears to be a price.

That price seems to involve strong cultural and generational conflicts between the students and their parents. This may be due to the students' loss of cultural identity and ethnic pride, loss of traditional values, lowered self esteem, confusion about American values learned mostly from TV, and frustration and feelings of failure caused by always being behind the other students in class. Many of these students drop out or join youth gangs even in late elementary school.

Implications for programing

The academic difficulties encountered by Hmong and other LEP students who first enter American schools at late elementary and secondary levels require attention unless the public is willing to accept the likelihood that these students in the future will be unemployed or underemployed. Presently, over thirty percent of St. Paul's Hmong students fit this description, at least six percent of the district's total enrollment. The unique needs of many Hmong and other LEP students suggest several programing possibilities, some of which run counter to the general mainstreaming trend.

Bilingual classes in key content areas.

The work of Cummins, Collier and others seems to clearly establish the link between first language academic proficiency (ability to read and do academic work in the native language) and the development of second language academic proficiency. Much of this work reflects a very simple idea: the more the learners already know about a topic, the easier it is for them to absorb and comprehend additional information, no matter what the language of instruction. This research strongly supports bilingual education, in which key concepts and vocabulary can be clarified,

sentences explained and questions answered in the native language. For students like the Hmong, who enter with such a poor academic background, this would seem to be particularly important. Either native language or English might be dominant in class depending upon the English proficiency of the student, but the stress on English would increase as classes progressed during the year.

Bilingual classes would build the knowledge base in particular subjects while also building vocabulary and language skills. For many students, this would provide the needed step towards taking more difficult academic classes. For others, the later arrivals, it might be their only realistic chance for acquiring some of this information at all. Bilingual classes would allow for a more efficient use of ESL staff who would be free to concentrate on dealing with the structure of the language, seeing to it that students would be able to speak and write correctly rather than spending time on content area materials and specialized vocabulary.

Less measurable but perhaps equally important is the fact that bilingual classes can tailor instruction to the cultural and learning style of the students. Bilingual classes often have the effect of building cultural pride and solidarity, maintaining traditional values, and creating positive self-awareness. In addition, parental-involvement is increased because parents, whose English may be poor and who feel intimidated in their dealing with the schools, are often quite comfortable with the bilingual teacher with whom they share language and ethnicity. Because of the bilingual teacher's closer links with the community, because of parental involvement, because the students have greater chance of success in the bilingual class, and because the students' culture is given value, there is an increased likelihood that students will remain in school and put effort into their studies. In this manner, schools may prevent problems from occurring.

LEP-specific or "sheltered" content-area classes

Sheltered content classes serve a purpose similar to that of bilingual classes but generally do not use bilingual techniques. Books and materials are selected according to the receptive competence of the students. Special attention is given to language development needs and the

building of background information. Prior knowledge would not be "assumed." Vocabulary would be deliberately taught which might be overlooked in mainstream classes.

Sheltered classes are generally taught only in English unless the teacher or an aide is able to answer individual questions in the student's native language. Optimally, the teacher should be a native-English speaker licensed in the appropriate content area. Many of the instructional dilemmas of mainstream content classes would disappear. Teachers could tailor methods and materials to the language needs of the students. This would allow for a more effective, efficient, and less-frustrating use of time for both students and teachers. The teacher wouldn't have to choose between boring the mainstream students or losing the LEP students. One advantage sheltered classes have over bilingual classes is that children of several language groups can be taught together, the only issue being the English level of the student and their prior academic background.

In either bilingual or sheltered classes, it is generally found that students become more actively and productively engaged in their coursework. With material aimed at their level and vocabulary and concepts explained, students are likely to understand more and feel that their efforts are worthwhile and productive. Students experience more success. Surrounded by others with similar problems, students are more likely to ask questions. Fewer students become frustrated, disaffected, and jaded.

Establishing classes of this sort takes into account the fact that students' time is limited. They need to learn important content area information as rapidly as possible because they are not five years old and do not have the luxury of starting at grade one. The object of the classes would be to teach information, concepts, and skills - not simply to fit a student into an existing class schedule structure.

The criteria for placement into either bilingual or sheltered classes would be language need. If tests or teacher evaluations determine that the child can indeed read and comprehend English at an appropriate level, he/she should be fully mainstreamed. (An exception to this might be for particular students who could be retained because of affective concerns; eg. Students who

are likely candidates for gang activity or emotional difficulties if not kept close to a strong ethnic role-model such as a bilingual teacher.) It should be further emphasized that even from the beginning, these students should be mainstreamed into classes in which the amount and level of the reading is not overwhelming. It appears that classes such as physical education, art, home economics, typing, industrial arts, and choral music are very appropriate classes in which LEP students can mix successfully and beneficially with native-English speaking students.

Partnerships with outside agencies and organizations to offer tutoring and/or cultural support.

The experience of one school, St. Paul's Highland Park Secondary Complex, may offer insight into ways in which partnership programs might be structured. Concerned about the academic and cultural-adjustment difficulties encountered by Hmong and other LEP students, teachers and administrators at Highland worked with voluntary agencies (volags) and ethnic mutual assistance associations (MAAs) to offer tutoring, counseling, specialized classes, and/or cultural activities both during and after school hours.

Starting in 1987, Lao Family Community, a Hmong MAA, came to Highland twice a week to offer counseling and special classes for Hmong students to encourage academic achievement and cultural adjustment. A pregnancy prevention program paired with health classes was a major component aimed at keeping more girls in school. Similarly, Hmong-American Partnership, a domestic MAA spin-off of the American Refugee Committee, offered after-school tutoring and assisted with Asian culture-club activities. Hmong Youth Association cooperated to offer an evening tutoring program and a "dial-a-tutor" service. Khmer Youth Leadership Project and Refugee and Immigrant Resource Center, both Cambodian MAAs, provided similar services for Cambodian students.

Workers from the above organizations cooperated with an in-school tutoring program administered and staffed by the Institute for Education and Advocacy (I.E.A.), another spin-off of American Refugee Committee. In lieu of the school district's mandatory study hall, LEP students at Highland could register for I.E.A.'s tutoring class. Tutors were recruited by I.E.A. staff from both inside and outside school. Highland mainstream students could earn credit by taking over a daily

tutor group supervised by the I.E.A. teacher. Many of these tutors were Hmong, Cambodian and Vietnamese students who could assist their "tutees" bilingually if needed, but who themselves did not need ESL assistance. I.E.A. also recruited adult-volunteers to act as tutors and mentors. College students who were looking for "pre-student teaching" experiences proved to be excellent tutors. Ben and Irina Lasoff are examples of retirees who have also volunteered and brought with them a lifetime of skills and experiences to the tutoring sessions. He a retired psychologist and she a former fine-arts instructor, they are in their fourth year of tutoring. Irina Lasoff:

> This [tutoring] is the high point of our day. It has just been marvelous to meet with these young people and feel like we're giving them a little boost. They're such nice kids and they have a tough road ahead. . . We talk about our students and plan what we're going to do. It's really good for us too; there's a sense of purpose.

The tutoring classes offered by I.E.A. have also provided a framework for the MAAs mentioned above to offer assistance. Students do not need to be pulled from established mainstream classes to get special assistance. The bilingual workers from the MAAs often assist students in the I.E.A. classes, as do the bilingual educational assistants hired by the school district. During the 1991-92 school year, the three I.E.A. tutor classes served about a hundred LEP students per semester.

While these tutor classes have received positive response from students, community members and school personnel, the program faces many difficulties. Joan Hill Dehzad, I.E.A. executive director:

> Presently, we are providing these services entirely with private grant money; the schools aren't putting up anything. But funders need to see a commitment from the schools in the form of a more formal partnership and at least some sort of cost sharing. Our central cost in each school is the teacher we provide to recruit, organize and direct the tutors. Perhaps part of this person's salary could be paid by the district. Even a limited share would impress the funders. Otherwise, eventually, it'll be tough to keep it going. . . . A formal partnership is important also because then we become a more official part of the school; we'd have a few more rights and responsibilities toward one another. We'd like to be able to take over where the schools leave off, even going into after-school or weekend activities. We've created Saturday mentor programs already. But to be successful outside of school, you really need to be involved in the school, too, to build connections with the kids. The connections are important. These programs can't function in isolation from one another.

District critics of LEP tutoring programs point out that there are many native-English speaking students in the schools who could also benefit from tutoring programs and that by targeting LEP students the programs discriminate against others while isolating the LEP kids. Proponents counter that opening the programs to all causes a loss of focus and purpose. Outside agencies, particularly MAAs, are much less willing to become involved in programs which are not intended for the population they represent; for example, Cambodian MAAs are interested in assisting Cambodian children and are willing to provided their limited resources and personnel to that end. If asked to instead provide services for African-Americans, Vietnamese, or Whites, the MAA will choose to use its resources in a different location or a different manner. More importantly, it is the focus of the program which provides its strength and value. Hmong children are drawn to the bilingual classes, to the sheltered classes, and to the tutorial programs <u>because</u> they are designed for their needs with special consideration for their culture. Opening the programs up would simply result in a loss of Hmong students. Proponents argue that perhaps similar programs should be created that cater to the special needs of other groups. Perhaps trying to include everyone means assisting no one.

Due to its large LEP enrollment and role as St. Paul's "newcomer center," Highland Secondary Complex was allowed more freedom to experiment with programing not otherwise endorsed by the district, within its ESL department and was provided with three bilingual educational assistants through a Title VII grant. Some "sheltered" content classes were created in science and social studies by the ESL teachers themselves using a bilingual component. Bilingual math classes were available which included geometry. These ESL and bilingual classes combined with the limited partnership arrangements with the MAAs and voluntary agencies appear to have had positive results. Outside consultants hired to evaluate the Title VII program discovered that, in spite of large class sizes, Highland was the only secondary school in the district in which LEP students had made statistically significant improvement in SRA scores from fall to spring in <u>any</u> of the three fields analyzed (reading, language arts, and math); Highland had done so in <u>all three,</u> at all grade levels tested. Further, surveys revealed a high level of student satisfaction and comfort

with the bilingual aspects of the program. (McCormick & McCormick 1989) The ESL staff as well as the evaluators were aware that it was indeed difficult to pin-point the reason for the success. Though the evaluation was for the Title VII program, in fact, the students had received assistance through a number of the programs described above. Nevertheless, some or all of the approaches described above appear to have had a positive effect.

Highland's enrollment of Hmong and other Southeast Asian students grew over a four-year period apparently because of the popularity of the ESL, bilingual and tutorial programs. The district's open enrollment policies allowed students to come to Highland who might have attended a school nearer to their homes. Other schools also had ESL programs but were more constrained in their course offerings. Because of the large numbers of Southeast Asians, district officials determined that Highland's minority ratio was out of compliance with OCR guidelines and that students should be transferred to other schools in spite of the open enrollment policy. Staff were transferred out of Highland's ESL department which was also constrained from offering "sheltered" courses which might be construed as "segregation" of Asian students. Thus ended some of Highland's attempts to create a better fit between programing and the needs of many secondary LEP students. Nevertheless, the popularity and success of what was attempted suggests that similar programing should be considered in other schools.

Vocational education and apprenticeships

Some refugee students and parents have complained that students entering schools in their middle to late teens have few options within school. The focus of the American high school is largely the completion of credits needed for graduation with the goal of college held out to those who are most capable. Often, many of the required classes offer little of direct value to the students, either because the classes are well beyond their abilities (science, social studies) or because they don't particularly contribute to solving the pressing language needs of the student (physical education, art, home economics). For some students, high school graduation is not a realistic possibility, or if achieved, may reflect only the acquisition of a set of minimal, watered-down, and mostly non-academic subjects. The statistics offered previously indicate that for many of these

students, college is not at all a realistic possibility. Perhaps a different model is in order, one which simply starts with the needs of the group in mind rather than a concern about "state requirements." For many of these older students, the most pressing needs involve only English and vocational training. They could be treated as adults except to the extent that their ages allow for more extended training than might be available to an adult learner. Students could be given a regimen of ESL, some bilingual instruction in areas of greatest job-related concern, vocational training and perhaps apprenticeship programs. The suggestion here is not that every student entering the country as a teenager be forced into this track, but that such a program be a possibility for those who could benefit from it and desire it.

Classes in native language literacy and culture

The generational conflict within the Hmong community described earlier may well be due to a devaluing of native language and culture in the eyes of the young. The negative ramifications of this in terms of increased gang activity, juvenile delinquency and school problems have led to suggestions that perhaps traditional culture and native language should be given support within the schools, starting as early as the primary grades. Research of Cummins and others suggests that simply on the basis of academic language development alone, native language literacy and bilingual education is needed from the beginning of school. However, affective concerns may be just as important. A focus on native language literacy would preserve rather than extinguish an important skill, would provide a format in which the traditional culture and positive values could be supported, and would provide for the student the sense that his/her people and culture had merit. Classes could be offered with the cooperation and assistance of ethnic MAAs who have as their goals the preservation of native language and culture and the success and cohesiveness of their people.

The suggestions made above are simply possibilities of programs which might assist in better meeting the needs of LEP students.

Conclusions

The programs offered in most school districts tend to focus on getting students into fully mainstreamed classes as quickly as possible, using ESL as the bridge. Though affective concerns are given little attention, the "mainstream + ESL" approach appears to work adequately for students who begin school in the primary grades, and perhaps for students who enter at secondary levels with an educational background commensurate with their American peers. However, many LEP students have had little or no education in their home countries and therefore require additional support and attention particularly as regards reading development and academically demanding content area classes.

A number of programs offer promise of better meeting the academic needs of LEP students while also providing support for the students' culture and affective development: bilingual classes, sheltered LEP content classes, tutoring programs, partnerships with outside organizations such as MAAs and voluntary agencies, native language literacy and culture classes, and targeted vocational training programs. By definition these programs segregate students for some portion of the school day, as do ESL classes, and therefore run counter to the principle of mainstreaming and its concern for the integration of minorities. While the situation represents a true dilemma, it is the position of this paper that the first priority must be to provide as good an education as possible, particularly for those students most at risk.

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